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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/12/2015  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LB](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: ASAD CALLS ON HAMAS NOT TO RECOGNIZE ISRAEL,  
DEFENDS LAHOUD

REF: FBIS GMP 20060305504001

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: In a March 4 speech at the opening of a pan-Arab conference in Damascus, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad urged Hamas not to recognize Israel, criticized efforts to oust Lebanese President Lahoud, and labeled U.S. actions in Iraq as part of a plan to divide and conquer the country and the region. He also mentioned the cartoon controversy, noting that boycotts were a far more effective tool than outrage. Asad's speech echoed themes from his November 10 and January 21 addresses, which highlighted the need for renewed pan-Arab unity against foreign efforts to divide and remap the region and which stressed the geopolitical importance of Syria as a "spearhead" in the struggle against such efforts. Asad's March 4 speech, however, stressed the need for the U.S. to urgently withdraw its troops from Iraq, a point he avoided making so explicitly in the past. Asad sharpened the rhetoric and spoke at greater length about his criticism of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. His rhetoric on Lebanon also represented a further softening from the extremely bellicose language he used in the November speech. He avoided attacking the current work of UNIIIC head Serge Brammertz. End Summary.

¶2. (U) President Asad urged Hamas March 4 not to recognize Israel until it restores the rights "to all Arabs, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine." Asad made his remarks in Damascus to representatives of over 100 political parties from 15 Arab countries participating in the three-day Arab Parties General Conference. Regarding Hamas, Asad noted that Syria has engaged in peace negotiations for years with Israel but had not recognized the country. He also pointed to what he called a double standard, noting that Israel is not being required to recognize Hamas or to disarm. He called Hamas's electoral victory "an election for resistance" that "proves the correctness of the Syrian position," saying it vindicated Syria's long-standing support for the Palestinian rejectionists based in Damascus, despite all the pressure put on Syria. The Hamas victory also demonstrated that Syrians understood earlier than others that "the path of resistance expresses the option of the Palestinian people." Asad added that Syria wants good relations with all Palestinian groups, including that led by current President Abu Mazen. On the peace process, Asad said it is not an option for the foreseeable future since Israel has demonstrated a lack of interest in peace and the U.S. has not taken an active role in re-starting the negotiations.

¶3. (U) IRAQ: A "TOLD YOU SO" TONE: A tone of vindication also crept into Asad's remarks on Iraq, as he noted that he

had warned American officials that they would "sink into the Iraqi quagmire" despite winning the war. Asad expressed his belief that the "withdrawal of the U.S. troops has become urgent" and urged Iraqis to express a united view on this issue. Regarding the recent attacks on mosques in Iraq, Asad said the attacks were aimed at destroying the unity of Iraq and its "national and pan-Arab identity." He placed such attacks in a wider context of developments in Iraq aimed at "diminishing the Iraqi citizen's affiliations" from national and pan-Arab ones into narrow tribal, sectarian, and religious attachments and said the objective was the division of the country. Early in his remarks, Asad alluded to what he referred to as two goals of the war in Iraq, including "re-drawing" the map of the Middle East, and obtaining oil, adding that Israel "remains a fundamental factor" in all such developments in the Middle East. Asad mentioned briefly the possibility of sending Arab peace-keeping forces in Iraq, but noted that an Iraqi official who visited Damascus had told him such troops would be treated as part of the occupying forces as long as U.S. troops remained in Iraq. He insisted that Syria has tried to support the political process in Iraq, including efforts to re-establish diplomatic relations, but that U.S. pressure had prevented the Iraqis from moving to improve relations.

¶4. (U) LAHOUD: Asad spoke at length about the political events in Lebanon since the passage of UNSCR 1559 that have led to the current "attacks" against President Lahoud, defending the Lebanese leader as "a staunch defender of the resistance." He described the attacks as "a plot that aims to get Lebanon away from Syria." Without referring to the March 14 group by name, Asad accused the bloc of "working under the command of others who are concocting plots against Syria." Interestingly, the official English version of the speech provided by the Syria News Agency (SANA) and reprinted in the Syria Times, deleted Asad's positive characterization of the national dialogue underway in Lebanon. Asad was quoted (in other versions) saying that "the dialogue currently ongoing in Lebanon is a positive step toward the return to reason if there is a desire to do so." However, Asad also noted that "dialogue in itself does not lead to the return to reason; the interlocutors must have the will to return to reason." (Note: The SANA version also deleted Asad's remark that "I will not defend President Lahoud," which he used to preface that very defense.)

¶5. (U) THE "CARTOONS" CONTROVERSY: Asad alluded briefly to the controversy over the caricatures of the prophet Mohammed, noting that the "outrage" in the Arab and Islamic worlds was justified. He did not refer directly to the mob actions in Damascus or other capitals, but pointed out that boycotts were a more effective tool than mere outrage and should continue to be used in the future against those who insult Islam.

¶6. (SBU) Throughout his speech, Asad cloaked his points in a pan-Arab rhetoric reminiscent of his January 21 speech, noting for example at one point that "what happens against an Arab country can't be isolated from the rest of the Arab countries." Events in Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon "are interrelated." However, he toned down his January accusations that attempts to blame Syria for the killing of Hariri were an attempt by the West to target not merely Syria but the entire Arab and Islamic world. His speech referred briefly to Islam as a pillar of strength for the Arabs and for the pan-Arab cause but did not make repeated Islamic references as he did in January.

¶7. (C) Comment: Asad's speech echoed themes from his November 10 and January 21 addresses, which highlighted the need for renewed pan-Arab unity against foreign efforts to divide and remap the region through actions in Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria and which stressed the geopolitical importance of Syria as a "spearhead" in the struggle against such efforts. Asad's March 4 speech, however, stressed the need for the U.S. to urgently withdraw its troops, a point he has avoided making so explicitly in the past, either publicly or privately. He also sharpened considerably his language

about Syria having been criticized unfairly for opposing the war and about having been vindicated for warning the U.S. that it was stepping into a quagmire. Asad largely avoided attacking the current work of the UNIIIC investigation into the assassination of former PM Hariri, a sharp departure from those previous two speeches, an indication perhaps that the regime feels the pressure is off now and that relations with Brammertz and his team have improved dramatically over the relationship the SARG experienced with Mehlis. He continued, however, to attack UNSCR's 1559 and 1636 as elements in a plot to destabilize Syria.

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